

Drug Testing through the Lens of an Olympian

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During my nine year career in the sport of bobsled, in which I received an Olympic gold medal, I spent the majority of my time training in the city of Calgary in Alberta, Canada. As a push athlete on the U.S. National Bobsled Team I had a very rigid training schedule during off-season training from April through October, and an even more rigid daily schedule once our season kicked off in mid-October as we started to “get on the ice.” Most mornings I found my alarm going off at 8 a.m. on the nose to give myself ample time for my central nervous system to be awake by our 10 a.m. training session. With my bedroom located in the front of the house though, I became very sensitive to any activity going on outside – and every now and then I would be awoken by the familiar role of a carry-on sized suitcase and two sets of shoes walking up my front walk at the crack of 6 a.m. There was no doubt in my mind what this was every time it happened. I always hoped it wouldn't turn into a knock and a doorbell, but inevitably it always did. I would bolt to the door and find two smiling U.S. Anti-Doping Agency (USADA) testers (also referred to as doping control agents), credentials in hand, waiting to come into my home to have to provide a urine specimen in a plastic cup.

This is a normal occurrence for any Olympic athlete in the Out of Competition (OOC) testing pool in (Yes, we enjoy acronyms around the sporting world). To be ‘lucky enough’ to be a part of the OOC testing pool you must be deemed so by your national governing body, which in my case was the USA Bobsled and Skeleton Federation (USBSF). Once you are put on this list you are eligible to be randomly tested, anywhere in the world, anytime from 6 a.m. to 10:30 p.m., 365 days a year. The first question that comes into someone’s mind when they are told this is – “How do they know where you’ll be?” The answer to that is a simply complex one.

Every American athlete training for the Olympic Games, and the majority of athletes in developed sport nations throughout the world, have to file their “Whereabouts” forms once per quarter in accordance with the World Anti-Doping Agency’s Anti-Doping Administration and

Management System (known internationally as WADA's ADAMS). This is to say, on December 31st an athlete must tell their national governing doping agency where they will be everyday from January 1st to March 31st. Do you know where you'll be 3 months from now? Then you're not training for the Olympics, are you!? From my viewpoint because this system has evolved it may be useful to discuss what occurred in the past, before we talk about what it is happening now.

As a decathlete at the University of Florida, there would be times when I would show up to practice and a little orange card would be in my locker. This meant that I had to be at the football stadium at 6:30 a.m. the next day for a urine test. This NCAA system right out of the gate is based on the premise of not really wanting to catch anyone. Any athlete with any common sense and who is doing something illegal, be it performance enhancing drugs (PEDs) or recreational drugs, can spend the night flushing their system and show up with their urine so diluted nothing will come out of it. Now there are safe guards against pH and specific gravity being abnormal, but a 16 hour heads-up doesn't form a very tight net to catch those who don't want to be caught.

When I entered USADA's OOC testing pool in the summer of 2001, I learned their system was significantly different than that of the NCAA. The previously mentioned quarterly whereabouts system was already in play (though at that time it was a paper/fax reporting system whereas it is now online). At that time the expectation was that you were on-call the entire day from 6 a.m. to 10:30 p.m. If the drug testers showed up where you said you would be and you weren't there, they would call you and the clock would begin to tick. An athlete had 2 hours to report to where the testers were or a missed test you be recorded. Three missed tests within a rolling 18-month period would be an automatic positive and yield a two year suspension, no questions asked. For full disclosure, I had two missed tests during my nine Olympic year career. But when you think about it, this 2-hour window isn't that much different of a concept from the 16-hour widow the NCAA kept. The sophisticated cheater could easily manipulate their urine within a 2-hour time window and duck a positive test by the time they did use the bathroom with the doping control agent.

The use of the bathroom during doping control is another fascinating, yet disturbing, experience in and of itself. Consider about how hard it can be to use the bathroom with another person in a public restroom. Now have a complete stranger be given the job to fully inspect

you while you are fully exposed. This is what Olympic level doping control is – a very humbling experience for any man. And I do mean for any man, as I cannot, quite obviously, speak to the experience for a woman but one would think it would be equally as awkward. Now, this type of testing comes from experience. The stories of athletes hiding devices in different parts of their body to store clean urine are rampant, so authorities must do all they can to ensure what's going into the cup is 'authentic.' Your first thought may be that this *must* be some sort of privacy violation, but at the end of the day the ability to compete at the Olympic level is a privilege, not a right, and in order to be eligible to do so athletes must adhere to very strict testing policies that are meant to do all they can to catch those who were trying to cheat.

I digress, though, and return back to the 2-hour phone call issue. This was something that was only done within the U.S., and international authorities came to question the practice. When the pressure became too much, the system was changed and the 2-hour phone call window was transitioned into a 1-hour mandatory location slot that is still in use today throughout the world. What this process entails is another layer of reporting within the whereabouts form.

The athletes are now required to give their national doping agency a 1-hour window when they will be held accountable to be at their specified location. Doping agents are still able to test an athlete outside of that 1-hour window, but a missed test will not be counted against the athlete if they happen not to be at their specified location. I would always make my 1-hour window from 6-7 a.m., as I knew this is when I would be sleeping and there would be no question of me being out of my house. This concept then leads to another interesting dilemma – is the athlete locked into their listed location for the next 3-months with no hope to be spontaneous?

And the answer is very simple – absolutely not. The current system allows for much flexibility and only requires a simple email from a registered email address to one's national doping agency. Many times if I would stay at a friend's house and the decision was made at 11 o'clock at night, a simple email stating the date, the address I would be located and the 1-hour time slot of where I would be was all that was required. This was made for the athlete's right to have as normal of a life as possible. The biggest issue with this is what the cheaters are doing with it to circumvent the system. Since no one is working at USADA at that hour to relay the information to a doping agent that has been sent out

in the field the next day, the information would have a day delay. When one resides and trains in a foreign country like myself, often USADA would contract CCES, Canada's national doping agency, to administer my test for them. Any information of my plans changing would certainly have a few day lag between systems. Many athletes in a variety of sports exploit this concept quite often and there still isn't much that can be done about it as long as we are allowing athletes to live as free of a life as possible and be treated as adults.

Everything I've described to you reflects upon the OOC testing program and not the In-Competition (IC) testing program. The testing menu (the substances actually looked for in the lab) for OOC testing and IC testing is probably the biggest difference between the two and could be talked about in length in another article. In a nutshell, the IC testing menu tests for many more substances than the OOC. Where the OOC menu generally looks at harder drugs and PEDs, the IC menu includes substances such as THC and some common medications. While the process for collection is the same for the IC and OC, often times the athlete doesn't find out about the IC testing until right after they are done competing. When this IC process is enacted a doping control agent is assigned to them and the athlete does not leave their site until the test is administered.

USADA issues a wallet card highlighting the differences, common do's and don'ts and other general advice about the system. I used to have this card on me at all times when I was still competing. USADA also offers a hotline manned by a professional to answer questions during the day that an athlete may have. Advice on which supplements may or may not have been found to have contaminants in them has always been something USADA has side-stepped with the athletes, though, but all and all it is a very good service provided to us.

As you can see, the evolution of drug testing has had many twists and turns in just the last decade, let alone if we were to go back to the days of systematic doping. The system has come a long way from the kind of material sitting on prominent Sports Illustrated writer and doping expert David Epstein's shelves like pamphlets from the 1980's labeled "Drug Testing... So what! -How to Beat the Test." Today's cheaters have much more to go up against and a system that is using science to improve its measures at every turn. Has doping control caught up with the bad guys yet? Most likely not, but it is continuously making it more expensive, more time consuming and more exhausting for the cheaters to

get away with it. It is my hope that someday we will be able to alleviate all doubt but the fact of the matter is that the system is still evolving because the system is still behind.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Steve Messler is a three time U.S. Olympian, a 2009 World Champion and a 2010 Olympic Gold Medalist in the bobsled.